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“Brave New Birds: The Use of ‘Animal Integrity’ in Animal Ethics”

Bovenkirk, Brom, and van den Bergh use the terms “integrity” and “naturalness” to address the notions of bioengineering and telos raised by Rollin. They note that the concept of integrity refers to a set of characteristics of a species humans define and believe is important to preserve, and that the identity of such characteristics can be elucidated by moral discussion. Even in the absence of full agreement, such discussions can help clarify the issues and evaluate existing practices.

Besides providing us with new biological knowledge and opening up some intriguing possibilities in medicine and agriculture, genetic engineering provides philosophers with some interesting thought experiments. Inspired by Bernard Rollin’s remark in The Frankenstein Syndrome about the creation of wingless, legless, and featherless chickens, Gary Comstock urges us to imagine just that: the transition of chickens into living egg machines.

[...] What if we could make these animals adjust better to their environment and genetically engineer them into senseless humps of flesh, solely directed at transforming grain and water into eggs. [...] Intuitively, treating an animal in this way—or rather creating an animal for these purposes—is morally problematic. This intuition is also prompted by uses of biotechnology that are already feasible and indeed are already in use, but the “brave new birds” provide a paradigmatic case.

In public debate in The Netherlands, these sorts of cases evoke appeals to such notions as integrity and naturalness. In the case of the egg machines, for example, we might say that the chickens’ integrity has been violated because we have interfered with their physical makeup, not for their own good, but for ours. We have tampered with the characteristics that make a chicken a chicken.

Why animal integrity?

This intuition that changing chickens into senseless, living egg machines is problematic and cannot be elaborated solely with the help of traditional moral concepts such as animal interests or animal rights.

“Welfarists,” like Rollin, take animals to have interests because, and only insofar as,
they are sentient. In other words, Rollin holds that animals have interests by virtue of their sentence, and therefore that only welfare matters from a moral point of view.

[...] Since the chickens are senseless, Rollin cannot raise any objection to the use of genetic engineering to turn these animals into machines. But even though Rollin asserts that he "sees no moral problem if animals could be made happier by changing their nature," elsewhere he seems to acknowledge that creating living egg machines is not a desirable course of action. Rather, it is the lesser of two evils "while it is certainly a poor alternative to alter animals to fit questionable environments, rather than alter the environments to suit the animals, few would deny that an animal that does mesh with a poor environment is better off than one that does not." This assertion seems to acknowledge the moral intuition that changing an animal's nature is objectionable, while holding that the circumstances may make it necessary. Clearly, however, suffering is not the main issue here. In other words, Rollin's concept of interest is too narrow to analyze our moral intuition.

Animal rights proponents, such as Tom Regan, argue that raising animals for food is wrong not primarily because it causes animal suffering, but because it is wrong in principle. This is because animals, like humans, are valuable in themselves and not only by virtue of their value to others. In other words, they possess inherent value and therefore have moral standing. According to Regan, the basis for this inherent value is that animals are "subjects-of-a-life." Regan regards mammals that possess a certain amount of awareness as paradigmatic subjects-of-a-life. If so, the senseless egg machines in our example are probably not subjects-of-a-life, and it is probably not wrong in principle to change chickens into them.

[...] Animal ethicists in The Netherlands have proposed the notion of animal integrity precisely because of the inability of interests and rights to accommodate the moral intuition that we should adjust the farm environment to the animal and not vice versa. Integrity has been described by Bart Rutgers as the "wholeness and intactness of the animal and its species-specific balance, as well as the capacity to sustain itself in an environment suitable to the species."7

Some objections

"Integrity" seems to be helpful because it has an objective, biological aspect. It implies that the animal is intact or whole, which is an attribute of the animal itself, not just some value we have placed on it. Integrity therefore could play an important role in elaborating moral concerns not only about genetic engineering but also about other interventions in animal life, like cross-breeding or intensive animal husbandry.

It is important to note that we would not speak of the violation of integrity in all cases in which an animal's intactness is violated. Rutgers holds that docking a dog's tail for aesthetic reasons constitutes a violation of the dog's integrity, but when the dog's tail must be docked for medical reasons, he claims that its integrity has not been violated. In effect, docking a dog's tail for these two reasons could be regarded as two different actions, depending on the intention with which the action is carried out.

But this raises a problem. If the physiological result of the two different kinds of docking is the same, then it seems that integrity is not a biological aspect of the animal itself after all. The concept then loses its objective, biological character and becomes a moral rather than an empirical no to a perceiv}

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empirical notion. It does not refer to a notion of factual intactness or wholeness so much as to a *perceived* intactness. It refers to how we feel an animal *should* be. That leaves us wondering how objective the notion of integrity really is.

A second difficulty with the notion of integrity is the problem of "gradation." If we are to judge the acceptability of, say, a certain scientific experiment on animal subjects, then we need to be able to weigh the moral good against the moral wrong. Only when we can deem one type of experiment more acceptable than another will 'integrity' have meaning in the context of ethical deliberation. If gradation were impossible, then every intervention constituting a violation of integrity would have to be dealt with similarly: either they would all have to be condemned, no matter how trivial the purpose, or none of them could be condemned, no matter how severe the consequences.

Gradation could be achieved in three different ways. First, violations of integrity could be graded based on the good that the violation aims at. The problem with this first position is that all the work has to be done by weighing goals and not by grading the moral wrongs. Integrity itself is not graded at all.

Second, one could consider respect for integrity as a prima facie duty that must be weighed against other prima facie duties. The problem with this strategy is that we must know more about integrity to do the weighing, which leads us back to the question about integrity's content.

The third way would be to describe different kinds of violations of integrity, some more severe than others. The problem with the third way is that, unlike the notions of well-being and health, integrity—conceived of as intactness or wholeness—seems to be an absolute notion. A body is either intact or not, and so either has integrity or not. It's like being pregnant: a woman is either pregnant or she is not; she cannot be more or less pregnant. The violation of integrity is not necessarily this absolute. Docking a dog's tail, for instance, does not seem to be as harsh a violation of its integrity as, say, the removal of one of its legs. The question is what basis we have for judging the weight of a violation of integrity. What criteria can we use to establish which of two violations is worse? And what criteria can be used to argue that the violation is bad enough to reject the possible good it constitutes (as in the case of scientific experiments)? We need grounds to make this kind of gradation possible. In other words: how can we measure integrity?